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## Editorial Introduction

Gordon Wells  
gwells@oise.utoronto.ca

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# Editorial Introduction

*by Gordon Wells*

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Correspondence: [gwells@oise.utoronto.ca](mailto:gwells@oise.utoronto.ca)

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Once again, this issue features articles by groups of educators who are collaborating to investigate and improve their practice and, in the process, to extend and develop their understanding of the principles underpinning their work. As the increasing number of links to such groups on the Links page attests, collaborative action research is on the increase, as is the number of educators who are experiencing the positive impact it has on their lives. Through inquiries undertaken with colleagues and students, they increase - and in some cases regain - their sense of agency within the increasingly standardized and controlled institutions in which they work; they also enhance - and in some cases rediscover - the satisfaction of creating new understandings that enable them to be more successful in supporting their students' learning and, at the same time make their own lives more meaningful and exciting. As several teachers with whom I have worked have told me, embarking on action research was what saved them from burn-out or from viewing early retirement as the light at the end of the tunnel of a career gone sour.

There is no doubt that working as a member of an ongoing group adds an important dimension to an individual teacher's research. Although each classroom is unique, the issues and problems that teachers grapple with are sufficiently similar for them to be able to provide each other with helpful comments and suggestions about questions of data collection and analysis. There are also clear advantages to hearing alternative perspectives when it comes to interpreting results and drawing conclusions about what direction to take next. But, as my own teacher colleagues have told me, the greatest benefit is the mutual support that group members receive from each other as they enact shared values and convictions.

One way in which such groups can be formed is through taking a course together. Through regular meetings and shared activities, teachers who may be relatively isolated in their own schools discover they are not alone and find encouragement in sharing experiences and aspirations with like-minded colleagues. This is the case with the authors of the first article. Denise Fischer, Maria Mercado, Vicki Morgan, Lori Robb, and Jacquelyn Sheehan-Carr write about the course they took with Myriam N. Torres at the University of New Mexico. In their case, joining together to write about their work together - their difficulties and achievements - was an important part of the transformational experience they have each undergone. As they comment in their conclusion: "Although starting was not easy, the engagement in teacher inquiry and subsequent commitment to it were facilitated by seeing the changes in our own classrooms. The benefits were there for us as teachers."

An alternative is to take part in a school-wide project aimed at overall improvement in some aspect of the school's mandate. In the second article, Janet Benton and Jean Wasko report on a collaborative project undertaken within the Genesis Academy for Teaching Excellence in South Florida. In 1997, with the support of the authors, the first at the local university and the second in

one of the high schools, eight schools in one school district, embarked on action research projects focused on the improvement of literacy. Not every teacher in these eight schools volunteered to become involved, but those who did (a total of 87) were able to join with the colleagues in their own schools in determining the issue(s) to be investigated and the action plan for their investigation. This article provides an extended answer to the question, "What did doing action research mean to the teachers?" For the majority, the project was a stimulating and effective form of professional development. However, some saw a deeper benefit: "Not only the students but also the teachers can benefit." As one teacher discovered: "Teacher research is a process and I am a lifelong learner."

The third article in this issue also focuses on literacy, but from a less familiar perspective. Based on interviews with parents of the children she teaches, Catherine Compton-Lilly reports an investigation of adults' attitudes to reading and learning to read. She finds that, although this group of parents can and do read for a variety of purposes, few think of themselves as avid readers. However, they recognize the importance of being able to read and, on the basis of their own experiences, express clear views about the sorts of teachers and teaching practices they hope for for their children. As Compton-Lilly emphasizes: "They are adamant about the importance of teachers in their children's education."

The next two articles involve university classrooms. In the first, David Alan Sapp writes about his first year English composition class at New Mexico State University. As an action researcher committed to critical pedagogy, he investigates his attempts to put into practice the critical and feminist theories that he teaches, hoping to empower his students to be both more confident in their own abilities and at the same time more understanding and critical in their interactions with others, within and beyond the classroom. Having his students become co-participants in the teaching/learning process, he believes, is an important way of "continuing the struggle for a more just educational system and a more just society overall," but, in order to succeed in doing this, he recognizes that he has to continue to be a learner himself.

In the fifth article, Mark Campbell Williams reflects on the changes he made in his teaching of a university business computing course. Dissatisfied with the initial narrow technical focus of his course, he conducted a rather different form of teacher research, drawing on psychological reflection and symbolic interpretation of dreams to rethink his approach. In this article, he dramatizes the interplay between various facets of the self he has discovered through his research in the form of a seminar discussion between himself and some of the thinkers who have most influenced him. With the addition of allegorical visual illustrations, this article makes a multimodal argument for self-knowledge as the basis for becoming a better teacher.

Together, these articles give an indication of the very varied approaches that are being adopted by teacher researchers and of the varied settings in which it is being carried out. What they all have in common, though, is the defining characteristic of practitioner inquiry. That is to say, a central concern to improve our practice and at the same time to increase our understanding of the principles and values that guide practice and of the particular situations and conditions that we share with the significant others - students, parents, colleagues - with whom we work.

## **Looking to the Future**

Later this year, we intend to start publishing guest-edited issues of Networks, organized either around a particular theme or bringing together the work of an ongoing local community of teacher researchers. If you would like to act as a guest editor or wish to recommend someone else who would, please contact the Managing Editor with your suggestion. We shall also continue to publish issues with individual contributions. So, if you have work that you would like to share with a wider audience, do not be reticent. The [Notes for Contributors](#) provide guidance on how to proceed and the Editorial Board are very willing to offer advice and encouragement. Finally, we also urge you, if you have benefited from reading about the experiences and discoveries of practitioner colleagues, to bring the existence of Networks to the attention of many more potential readers and contributors who might also find it helpful.